

Beyond Pax Americana: US strategy after the Arab Spring

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Abstract

Ever since the United States became a global power it sought to preserve its hegemony in the strategically vital regions, including the Middle East. In order to secure regional hegemony in the region the United States has historically articulated three main strategic objectives: maintaining strong alliance relationships, limiting the influence of adversaries, and preserving a regional order. However, according to the thesis of this article, since the war on terrorism began, in the wake of the terror attacks of September 11, 2001, some of the major strategic decisions taken by the United States, including its war in Iraq, the containment of Iran, its unconditional support for Israel, and incoherent policies regarding post-Arab-Spring Egypt and Syria undermined the above mentioned strategic objectives. In relation to these strategic setbacks and in light of the enormous costs the United States had to bear in recent years in connection to its strategy, Donald Trump campaigned for less American presence in the region. However, some structural components of US engagement towards the region and some enduring strategic interests suggest that there will not be any large scale disengagement from the Middle East.

Keywords: United States, Middle East, Donald Trump, strategy

Introduction

Since the end of the Second World War active American presence in the strategically vital regions of the globe has been a cornerstone of the United-States-led global order. These strategically vital regions have been Western Europe and East Asia (because of their economic and military potential), and the Middle East due to its vast energy resources. Although the geopolitical attributes of the three regions have always differed significantly, American strategic objectives towards them were identical concerning three main components. The United States sought to establish and maintain stable alliance partnerships, limit the influence of regional adversaries, and preserve the regional order.

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These objectives became the foundations of American dominance in the Middle East, and secured its unique power in the region well into the post-Cold-War era. However, there have been an increasing number of signs – from the emergence of ISIS to Iran’s growing influence and Russia’s reentry into the region as a serious stakeholder – that the days of American hegemony in the region may be long gone. This paper argues that US strategy under the Bush and Obama administrations significantly contributed to this decline of American influence in the Middle East. Furthermore, despite the new Trump administration’s early pledges that it will significantly alter American strategy concerning the region, powerful structural factors will limit the scope of any significant change.

The strategy of hegemonic primacy in the Middle East

After the Second World War the United States became the leading external power in the Middle East. The above mentioned three general strategic objectives were gradually operationalized into three goals for the region: to maintain Israel’s strategic edge, to preserve American hegemony in the Persian Gulf (Haass, 2006: 1-2), and, increasingly from the 1990s, fighting terrorism (Oren, 2008: 574, 578). The Camp David accords in 1978 secured America’s position as an indispensable actor in the Levant and cemented its relations with Israel. The Gulf War against Iraq in 1991 solidified relations with Arab monarchies in the Gulf and strengthened American military hegemony in the Persian Gulf and in the wider region (Terrill, 2006: 18-19). In addition, the United States has built strong security and defense relationships with an array of countries in the region.

At the same time, the United States searched for ways to contain the influence of adversarial powers in the region. Since the Islamic revolution in 1979, Iran has been the premier foe of Washington in the region, but one of its main rivals, Iraq, was also considered to be a major threat for American interests until the Bush administration decided to overthrow Saddam Hussein’s regime in 2003. The United States articulated regional strategies which contained these regional powers and their proxies, such as the “Carter doctrine” of 1980 and the “dual containment” beginning in 1993 (Indyk et al, 1994: 3). The close partnership and support for regional allies, the enforcement of international rules, underpinned by robust diplomatic and military presence, established an American-led regional order. Within this framework for decades the United States prioritized stability in the region, and as a result US hegemony seemed unchallenged on the eve of the new millennium. However, the vast American superiority and fear ignited

by 9/11 invited such strategies during this period which not only resulted in strategic overreach, but gradually undermined America's position in the region.

During the decade between 2001 and the Arab Spring, US foreign policy focused on four major conflicts in the wider Middle East region, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the Iranian nuclear issue and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This focus was not only specific for the Bush administration, but for the first two years of the Obama administration. Both administrations sought to preserve American hegemony in the region by focusing American resources and attention on these conflicts. The Arab Spring in 2011 brought about a new political and security environment with new challenges for American interests in the region. As a result the focus shifted, initially towards Libya, then towards the war in Syria, while the Iranian nuclear issue remained an important element of U.S. engagement towards the region, and Iraq got back into the spotlight with the emergence of the self-declared Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2014.

The post-9/11 era: Strategic overreach

The 9/11 terrorist attacks created a new context for the Bush administration to shift its strategy towards the region. Based on the presumption that authoritarian regimes throughout the region invited extremism and some of them posed a direct threat to American national security, the Bush administration elevated the concept of preemptive strike and 'democracy export' to policy, as demonstrated in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The war in Afghanistan started in October 2001 as narrowly defined regime change and, primarily, a counterterrorism operation (Rumsfeld, 2003), but gradually expanded into a long and costly nation-building project, culminating in President Obama's surge strategy between 2010 and 2012. This long and costly engagement distracted American attention and resources away from more vital areas and issues. The removal of the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq in the spring of 2003 and the subsequent US decisions ignited chaos and instability, and brought the country on the verge of all-out civil war by 2007 (Cordesman, 2006: 276). Later, the Obama administration's decision to follow up on the Bush administration's promise that all American forces would leave Iraq by the end of 2011 contributed to the deteriorating domestic political and security situation after 2011 (Cordesman, 2015). The war did not only destabilize Iraq and strengthened extremist anti-American forces and terrorist organizations throughout the region, but gave a significant boost to the influence of Iran in Iraq and in the Middle East.

The Bush administration also articulated a forceful strategy towards Iran, especially after Tehran's nuclear program began to take off in 2003. President Bush did not seek to negotiate to resolve its differences with the Iranian regime, but chose an all-out forceful containment strategy (Meier 2013: 5-7). Although this strategy pleased some of America's allies in the region, it weakened American positions as Iran was able to successfully retaliate on several different fronts in the Middle East, and it benefited from the anti-American perceptions of publics in the region (Balogh, 2013: 212). Although President Obama initially signaled more openness towards negotiations with Iran, he kept up similar pressure on Tehran during his first term, did not rule out the threat of the use of force, nor did he show much more room for compromise on the substantial questions of the nuclear issue (Parsi, 2012: 46-47). It was the combination of the international coalition Obama built to put pressure on Iran, the second Obama administration's greater flexibility and the changes in the Iranian political leadership which together opened up the door towards the Iranian nuclear deal during Obama's second term.

The decades-old Israeli-Palestinian conflict remained an unresolved and potentially explosive issue throughout the whole period. Despite efforts by the Bush administration to revive the peace process, the administration gave Israel nearly unconditional support throughout its tenure concerning regional security issues and its approach towards the Palestinians by maintaining generous diplomatic and military support for Tel Aviv (Rostoványi, 2006: 203-205). Barack Obama's initial statements directed towards the right wing, hawkish Israeli government of Benjamin Netanyahu seemed to imply a more balanced approach towards the two sides. However, the administration gradually backtracked from its claims concerning Israel's controversial activities in the West Bank (Gerges, 2012: 120). Furthermore, American military aid towards Israel was never more generous than during the Obama administration (Sharp, 2016: 1-2). At the same time, this unique support towards Israel has made cooperation with other allies in the Middle East much harder politically for the United States, and it strengthened anti-American sentiment in the region (Mersheimer et al, 2006: 32-34). Furthermore, it strengthened the position of Iran as it could paint itself as a defender of those perceived to be oppressed by Israel.

After the Arab Spring: A half-hearted shift

The Arab Spring confronted the United States with a set of new challenges in the region. One of the central initial questions the administration had to answer was whether to

support the aspirations of the revolutions or promote stability along the lines of decades of American policies. The Obama administration gave mixed responses with mixed results at best. It actively supported regime change in Libya without a clear follow-up strategy, and as a result Libya descended into chaos and also became a host for ISIS projecting instability throughout the region (Kuperman, 2015). In Egypt, after some initial uncertainty concerning its approach towards the upheaval in Cairo, the United States let go of the hands of President Mubarak. The decision was carefully followed by America's allies in the region and triggered grave concerns especially in Saudi Arabia, a key ally of Mubarak (Rieger, 2013: 9). The lack of a firm approach towards the Muslim Brotherhood during its tenure in Egypt further strengthened these fears. However, it was the administration's Syria policy which became the hallmark of President Obama's Middle East strategy of restraint. The administration's publicly declared intentions – "Assad must go", "red lines" – were not in accordance with the basic decisions the administration took regarding the conflict (Kaplan, 2013). However, these public statements hardened the positions of the opposition and the rebel groups against the Assad regime in the initial stages of the conflict, while as time passed by, the gap between the rhetoric and the actual policy undermined US credibility. The uncertainty regarding US strategy also encouraged Russia's entry into the conflict. Moscow's military engagement was limited in size but was forceful enough to be effective, enhancing Russia's leverage in the Middle East (Stepanova, 2016).

The implications of US strategy on key alliances in the region also deserve attention, especially the ones toward Israel and Saudi Arabia. Although the strong US pressure on Iran and the "free-riding" of Israel and especially Saudi Arabia on American security guarantees had obvious benefits for these countries, they also had negative consequences on the long term. These two regional powers became accustomed to generous US support towards them, which decreased the pressure to make difficult choices or changes regarding key policy areas. In the case of Israel, there has been no urgent need to resolve the Palestinian issue, which could further isolate Israel on the international stage. In the case of Saudi Arabia, there was no pressure to engage Iran more pragmatically on regional security issues and to pursue much needed domestic reforms which would have produced a stronger, more resilient and confident Saudi Arabia. US policies may have fueled significant tensions with these key allies, thus politically weakening these alliances, and in the long term, they have also made their allies more vulnerable.

What is common in the above described US policies is that they at least partially reflect liberal interventionism and the strategy of primacy. Both of these concepts prescribe the maintenance of US hegemony in the Middle East (Mearsheimer, 2011), with a strong emphasis on the use of military force and an uncompromising approach towards adversaries (Posen et al, 1996: 26-27, 32). The Iranian nuclear arrangement brokered in the summer of 2014 stands out from the above mentioned strategic developments. Contrary to the above mentioned strategic approaches the form and the substance of the Obama administration's rapprochement towards Iran on the issue demonstrated realism and the strategy of selective engagement (Posen et al, 1996: 15-17). It focused on reaching pragmatic gains without pursuing too ambitious goals, and it was based on a proper assessment and acknowledgement of the balance of power in the region. Furthermore, the multilateral format of the P5+1 secured international legitimacy and maximized pressure on Iran.

In summary, the above cited strategic decisions of the Bush and the Obama eras strengthened adversaries – Iran, Islamist extremists –, weakened the long-term position of allies and contributed to the unraveling of the regional order. Furthermore, there was a wide-spread perception of American disengagement and weakness during the Obama presidency. As a consequence the influence of the United States significantly weakened during this period, though it must be stated that other factors also contributed to this development. The underlying structural trends in the region – demographic shifts, economic challenges, scarce resources, climate change – and weak governance fueled internal instability, while the growing influence of emerging powers altered the calculus of regional actors. All these factors gradually undermined the US-led regional order.

President Trump and “America First:” implications for the Middle East

As a presidential candidate Donald Trump harshly criticized his predecessors' Middle East policies. His criticism was centered around two main themes: the enormous costs and failures of the nation building projects on the one hand, and weakness shown towards adversaries on the other (Overhaus et al, 2016). In his perception, a strategy built on the concept of “America First” would scale back America's commitments to the region, but would respond with overwhelming force to any threat perceived as vital for national security interests.

Although Donald Trump has sketched up a more restrained presence in the Middle East, there are deeply embedded strategic and economic structural forces which indicate

that a quick and sharp departure from the region is not very likely. Three key pillars will likely remain cornerstones of US engagement towards the region: arms sales especially to partners in the Persian Gulf, a special relationship towards Israel backed up by strong domestic political forces in the US, and continued American interest in securing the uninterrupted flow of energy sources from the region.

US arms sales agreements to the Middle East region were worth \$54.6 billion USD between 2012 and 2015, with a significant amount of arms to be delivered in the coming years (Theorary, 2016: 14). As Donald Trump has emphasized the importance of keeping a strong manufacturing base at home, the defense industry is likely to play an important role in this respect, implying a need to secure export markets. The uncertain regional security environment also creates incentives for further arms exports. US–Israeli ties will likely remain strong in the coming years as US-based influential pro-Israeli political groups and a largely pro-Israeli Congress will still have considerable influence over the relationship. Despite the growing energy independence of the United States from the Middle East due to its increasing oil and gas output, the US still has an enormous stake in the stability of the international energy market. A major disruption in supply would significantly hurt not just the US economy, but also the economies of allies in Europe and Asia. Analyzing the statements and the perceptions of key actors in the new Trump administration concerning the region, the influence of these structural forces is visible in the developing new American Middle East strategy.

The priority of American engagement will be counterterrorism. The administration will seek to defeat ISIS in Syria, Iraq and elsewhere in the region as soon as possible (Byman, 2016). The Trump administration has also indicated that it will not necessarily adhere to the departure of Assad. This policy is supported by Donald's Trump promise that there will be no nation building projects and large scale military interventions.

In this context there will be more leeway given to allies such as Israel, Egypt or the Arab monarchies in the Gulf concerning their controversial policies towards the issues of human rights or counterterrorism issues.

The Trump administration's likely forceful approach towards Iran could further strengthen relations with these allies. Despite promises given during the campaign that as President he would not respect the nuclear agreement (Lobrer, 2016) the new administration will likely not withdraw unilaterally from the deal. However, the long term durability of the arrangement is now more uncertain. President Trump's first national

security advisor Michael Flynn (who remained in position until mid-February 2017) has stated that the administration has “put Iran on notice,” which foreshadows greater tensions ahead between Washington and Tehran (Flynn, 2017). Keeping the Persian Gulf stable and securing Israeli interests are the basic motivations behind the tough approach towards Iran.

The strong supportive statements towards Israel indicate closer relationship between Washington and Tel Aviv than during the previous years. This will also mean that the US will continue to have to spend a lot of diplomatic capital in the region and on the international stage to defend its ally. It also implies maintaining a strong military deterrent in the region against Iran and continued aid for the Israeli military.

The relationship with Turkey will also remain crucial in terms of US engagement towards the region. President Erdogan and the Trump administration might find common ground in confronting ISIS, but aligning policies on the future of Syria, Iraq and the Kurds will be a difficult exercise even though Turkey’s recent rapprochement with Russia might help this process (Mankoff, 2016). However, if Turkey’s recent overtures towards Moscow and Beijing are more strategic and Ankara’s commitment towards NATO and the West is further weakened, then such developments would negatively influence the relationship with Washington.

However, there seems to be a major inconsistency within the Trump administration’s strategy towards the region. On a structural level, it wants to reduce American commitments in the region, while it still seeks to be respected as a powerful actor and sets ambitious objectives in the region. The main issues where this paradox might materialize are the conflicts between the containment of Iran and the administration’s Syria policy. Iran can only be contained effectively and allies in the Gulf could only be satisfied if the US applies great pressure on the Assad regime, Iran’s principal ally in the region. Furthermore, a robust and costly military presence in the region is also essential to implement the Iran strategy envisioned by the administration. If the Trump administration foregoes with a compromise with Russia and Iran on Syria that might severely affect Washington’s leverage with those allies who support the rebels. The Trump administration at some point will likely have to choose between his two contradicting objectives.

Despite Donald Trump’s sharp criticism of the Obama administration’s Middle East policy, there is likely a lot of continuity between the approaches of the two administrations. The Obama administration was also pursuing an aggressive

counterterrorism strategy in the region, using drone strikes and special forces frequently and loosely. Short of a substantial increase of military presence on the ground in Iraq and Syria, which is unlikely, there is not much more the Trump administration can do to roll back ISIS. Prioritizing the fight against ISIS and remaining largely passive militarily against the Assad regime was also a feature of the Obama administration's Syria policy. Concerning the relations with Israel there will be a lot of continuation in substance, especially with regards to the massive military aid the US has provided. The difference will be more on the political and diplomatic level, where even more American support is expected.

Conclusions

The flawed American strategy over the past fifteen years has accelerated the loss of influence of the United States in the Middle East. During his presidential campaign Donald Trump promised a major change in the US approach towards the region, on the one hand emphasizing the need for less costly American presence, at the same time envisioning a more forceful approach in confronting vital national security threats.

However, despite the promise of change there will be likely a strong continuity in American strategy due to lasting structural elements of US engagement towards the region. Furthermore, the strategy envisioned by the Trump administration has conflicting objectives which cannot be achieved in parallel in the strategic landscape of today's Middle East. Although it is possible to have overall less American engagement with more forceful short-term interventions, the latter approach carries serious risks of escalation. In the latter case the United States could easily repeat some of the mistakes of the past.

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